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SUBJECT: CHRISTIANS STILL NERVOUS IN SOUTH INDIA

REF: A) CHENNAI 315, B) NEW DELHI 2513, C) CHENNAI 326

¶1. (SBU) Several of South India's Christian leaders expressed their continuing fear of anti-Christian violence to Joannella Morales, an officer in the Department's Office of International Religious Freedom, during her visit to Chennai and Bangalore on October 7 and ¶10. While violence on the scale of the September 14-15 attacks in Karnataka has not been repeated (refs A and B), Morales's interlocutors said that they fear that upcoming parliamentary elections may encourage Hindu radicals to continue to target Christians to attract Hindu votes. Hindu leaders said that the vast majority of Hindus abhor violence but that some Christian groups proselytize using techniques that many Hindus find offensive. Police in Bangalore told Morales that every church in the city is guarded by at least two police officers at all times and that they are determined to prevent violence. End Summary

Christians and Hindus in Chennai offer explanations

¶2. (SBU) In Chennai, Morales spoke with both Christian and Hindu leaders about the recent violence against Christians in India. Catholic Archbishop Dr. A.M. Chinnappa said that the national network of Hindutva-promoting organizations is essentially probing various spots in India to see where it can succeed in promoting violent attacks, arguing that some upper-caste Hindus are vehemently opposed to the efforts of the Church to uplift the lower castes. He also said that allegations of "forcible conversions" are a "bogey" raised by the Hindutva organizations to stir resentment among Hindus in the hopes of electoral gain.

¶3. (SBU) Assemblies of God National Superintendent Pastor D. Mohan told Morales that the attacks are being organized with a view to capturing votes in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections in India. "The BJP agenda is to create enmity between the Hindus and Christians so that the whole Hindu vote would go to them", he said. He also alleged that India's Home Minister, Shivraj Patil, is reluctant to act forcefully because he is an "RSS man in his heart". Mohan told Morales that RSS leaders --whom he perceives to be directing the violence -- are mindful of their reputation abroad and urged the U.S. Government to raise its voice against the violence.

¶4. (SBU) Malini Parthasarathy, Executive Editor for The Hindu, one of India's most prominent dailies and a vocal secularist, told Morales that communal violence against religious minorities occurs mostly in states ruled by the BJP, particularly in situations where the minorities are of little electoral significance. She criticized the Government of India for not acting forcefully enough to curb the violence but maintained that she believes the GOI's sympathies lie with the minorities. She ruled out, however, the possibility of the Center dismissing the Orissa and Karnataka governments, emphasizing that the Center's governing coalition would not have the votes to pass such a motion in the Lok Sabha.

¶5. (SBU) BJP National Secretary Thirunavukkarasar told Morales that "95 percent of the BJP's leaders" are against violent opposition to religious minorities, although the party uniformly opposes "forcible

conversions." (The term "forced" or "forcible" conversion has different meanings to different people. We will explore some of these meanings and their implications in subsequent reporting.) Thirunavukkarasar said that he draws a distinction between the RSS and some of its more radical, affiliated organizations like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal that have been directly implicated in some of the violence. He argued that although the RSS stands for the Hindu community, it is not inclined towards organizing violent action.

Karnataka's Christians fearful of upcoming elections

¶6. (SBU) Christian leaders in Karnataka told Morales that upcoming state and national elections are making their community increasingly fearful of attacks. By-elections elections for eight seats in the state legislature are not yet scheduled but need to be held within the next few months. These elections could bring down the state's government if the governing BJP fails to win them, raising Christians' fears that some Hindu groups supportive of the BJP might use violence to target them and shore up electoral support.

Attacks not a new phenomenon

¶7. (SBU) Benedict Balu, President of Karnataka Christa Ranga, a group that represents former Dalit converts to Christianity, said that he fears the state's current crackdown against Hindu extremist groups could soften as the elections approach. He also said that radical Hindu groups like the Bajrang Dal have targeted Dalit Christian pastors -- who often preach in homes or makeshift structures -- since the BJP came to power in Karnataka in 2006 as

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part of a coalition government. He alleged that these attacks attracted little media attention, and that the issue gained prominence only when attacks on organized and more prominent Christian facilities took place.

Attacks on Churches subside in Karnataka

¶8. (SBU) While petty violence and vandalism against churches continues sporadically, serious violence against Christians and their places of worship appears to have tapered off, at least for now. Bangalore's Police Chief Shankar Bidari told us that he had posted two constables at each church in the city. He also said that he had called in church representatives after the September 21 attacks (ref C) to discuss measures to better coordinate security.

¶9. Bernard Moras, the Catholic Bishop of Bangalore, confirmed to us that he observed a definite drop in the frequency of attacks on churches in the state. Lakshmi Narayan, Secretary to Karnataka's Chief Minister, told Morales that the government's "clear instructions" to the police to crack down on perpetrators of violence were responsible for the drop in attacks.

Christians see discrimination in prosecution

¶10. (SBU) While Christians are pleased that violence is decreasing, they are angry about what they believe is discrimination in how the legal system is addressing the violence that occurred between September 14 and 22. Bishop Moras told Morales that 35 of the 152 Christians arrested mainly in Mangalore have been charged with serious offenses, like attempted murder. He alleged that the 16 arrested members of the extremist Bajrang Dal, however, have been charged with minor offenses, like creating a public nuisance. While Karnataka's Chief Minister agreed to the Catholic Archbishop's demand to allow the charged Christians out on bail, they continue to face the possibility of a sentence much more severe than the Bajrang Dal members who initiated the violence.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) The violence in Karnataka may have subsided, but tensions remain. The Christian community will remain a little-understood and easy-to-demonize target for Hindu radicals. We believe the police are making good-faith efforts to prevent violence against Christians in Karnataka, but their capacity to do so successfully will come under severe strain if Hindu radicals make a concerted effort to target churches.

¶12. (U) This message was coordinated with Embassy New Delhi. IRF Officer Morales did not have the opportunity to clear.

SIMKIN